

“THE FRUITFUL LIFE”

10. Self-control

1 Peter 5:1-11

Earlier this week there was a fascinating documentary on television about Usain Bolt, the Jamaican athlete who is known as “The Fastest Man on Earth” because of just amazing performances at 100m and 200m. It followed in through his training and the preparation for his races – the weeks, months, of work for less than 10 seconds of performance. We saw his fitness regime, his physio sessions, his mental focus on the race, his single-minded focus on retaining his status as the one of the world’s greatest athletes.

In the wake of the Tour de France, I’ve also been reading articles about Chris Froome, who has now won four Tours and whose athleticism rivals Bolt’s because of the stamina and strength he needs to demonstrate day after day on the route up and down mountains. His training regime is even more detailed and focussed on winning that yellow jersey, right down to the smallest details of diet, sleep patterns, even hand-washing and laundry (to prevent the smallest infection or virus spoiling his health).

Both men have astonishing training programmes and dedicated coaching teams who help them to keep focussing on the prize, who keep them at the peak of fitness and who offer advice and help at all times. But they also have to give up an awful lot during the training periods. They can’t go out when they want and have a good meal or a drink. They have to be very careful about what other activities they take part in so that there’s no risk of injury. And they spend time away from their friends and family. I have a nephew who is a gymnast and when he was invited to join his national team squad in his early teens, it would have meant moving away from him and spending all his time with the team well away from any distractions.

St Paul uses this kind of parallel to make a point about living as a Christian in *1 Corinthians 9:25-27*, in a culture where sport was almost as highly regarded as it is with us today.

“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”

And that is the idea that lies behind the last of the nine qualities which Paul lists in *Galatians 5:22,23* as “*The Fruit of the Spirit*”. These are the characteristics of the life of the person who has taken the decision to follow Jesus and who has allowed the Holy Spirit to transform them. These followers of Jesus, the disciples – as most of us would claim to be – are people who do not want their lives to be filled with what Paul calls “*the acts of the sinful nature*”, but who want to walk the way of the Holy Spirit and show these alternative qualities, to cultivate these attitudes which contrast so sharply with the attitudes of the broken world around us.

This morning we come of the last of them – “*self-control*”. Just so we get the full set, the Greek word is “*ekgrateia*”. At the root of the word is the little word “*krat*”, which means “*power*” and which we find in English words such as “*autocrat*” – someone who takes power for himself; or “*plutocrat*” – someone whose power comes from his money; or “*democrat*” – someone who believes in power for the people. It’s about taking power over oneself, mastering one’s own personality and desires. The great Greek philosophers – Aristotle, Socrates, Plato – all saw this as one of the chief virtues of a person, and it was a word used of an Emperor or ruler who never let his own personal and private interests influence the government of his people.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates this as “*being able to marshal and direct our energies wisely*”. Martin Luther translates it with a word that means “*temperance*”. Once again we can see how this particular quality contrasts very sharply with the excess and abandon of “*the acts of the sinful nature*”. You see, the very reason that “*the acts of the sinful nature*” are so called is that they are just that – acts of the sinful **nature**. It’s the stuff that, because of our broken humanity, living our lives in a world that is itself distorted by evil and not as God wants it to be, we end up doing **naturally**. There have been all sorts of explorations of this in the social sciences and in literature as well as in theology. Think of a book such as *Lord of the Flies*, for example, where a bunch of shipwrecked children become pretty well feral and totally amoral. Left to our own devices most of us are selfish and jealous, we get angry, we look to satisfy our natural instincts, we indulge in all kinds of stuff almost without thinking.

That is our “self” taking over, our sinful nature. Now, of course, we have laws and conventions, customs and regulations which, over the centuries we have formulated to try and keep in check those baser instincts, particularly as far as they affect other people or impinge on the general good of society. Again, though, over the centuries some of that safeguarding legislation and custom has been eroded. Since the Enlightenment in the 18th century, the idea that there might be some God-given purpose to all of this has been largely de-bunked as science and reason have moved to centre stage – we are only concerned with **what** we can do and how we can do it safely, rather than **why** we should be doing it at all. Since the middle of the last century particularly, the drive has been towards personal freedom and the right of each person to do what they want, so long as it doesn’t affect other people’s rights to be free – so long as we agree with those other people, of course. Whatever o views on homosexuality, it’s interesting that this year’s 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexual practice has been promoted as 50 years of “sexual **freedom**”. And, as we’ve said several times recently, in even more recent years some of those things that once were held in check – greed, envy, individualism, materialism – have become part of the very foundation of our economic system and our social policy. If you don’t believe me, just think for a moment about personal debt or the normalisation of obscenity.

So, for us, as the third millennium takes shape, this message of Paul is even more urgent. We need to be in control of our very selves, we need to take the decision that we are not going to give in to the stuff within ourselves that bursts out into these sinful acts. We need to be working to keep ourselves chaste, pure, holy. We need to be striving to be people of integrity, of humility, of honesty – of all the things in this list of the Fruit of the Spirit. In the words we read from Peter’s *First Letter*, we need to be “*self-controlled and alert*”, always on the lookout for those things that prey on our weaknesses, that exploit our vulnerability. You know what those weak points are – whether it be greed, sexual immorality, anger, pride or whatever – in their many and varied guises.

Just as with an athlete, this is a question of training, but of training your thoughts and attitudes, keeping a close watch on the things that influence you, looking at the culture around you with a critical eye so that you can spot the insidious ways in which evil tries to grab hold of you. When he wrote to the Philippians, Paul gave them a list of things they should be trying to do (Paul seems to be very fond of lists, doesn’t he?); a template, if you like, against which to measure our attitudes. In *Philippians 4:8*, he says this:

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”

Now, of course, we could all say – and some of you are already thinking it, I guess – “Well, it depends what you mean by ...” or “Some of those terms are very vague”. That is to miss the point and, as we so often do, believe that talking about something is a proper substitute for actually doing something about it. You know, don’t you, if you are not living as God wants. You know which of these things particularly apply to you. You know where maybe repentance is needed and you need to have a real good re-think of your attitudes and priorities. Do you really have your self under control? Are you sure you can resist the temptation that you know pops up at just those times when you are feeling vulnerable and easily give in?

Chris Froome, Usain Bolt – and all the other elite athletes who astound us and entertain us – they have a very strict regime and there’s a heck of a lot that they are prepared to give up because of their focus on a gold medal or a yellow jersey or a badge or belt or trophy. Do you not think that the promise of eternity spent with God in his renewed Kingdom is worth more than a bit of coloured Lycra or a disc of metal on a string? Why are we so reluctant to give up those things, to deal with those attitudes which we know are steadily distancing us from the relationship with God that will guarantee us an eternal reward?

Again, as we’ve said each week so far, this isn’t easy stuff. If it were, we all be doing it without any problem. We need the help of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, an unswerving belief that Jesus has actually dealt with it already through his death and resurrection. And this last quality of the Fruit of the

Spirit is probably the most difficult, but the most important, because without self-control the others don't come quite so easily either.

And here, Jesus seems actually to make it seem a bit more difficult still. When he was talking to his disciples in the immediate wake of Peter's confession that Jesus really is the promised Messiah, in *Luke 9:23ff*, he said this:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?"

Yes, Jesus does help us. Each week of this little series we've seen his offers, his promises of help. But before we can avail ourselves of that, we have to make a conscious decision that we want to walk the way of the Holy Spirit, that we want to display the Fruit of the Spirit, that we want to overcome the *"acts of the sinful nature"*. You can't just drift into this stuff. It won't all turn out OK in the end if we just plod along as we are.

Jesus told his disciples to *"take up their cross daily"*. This was going to be a constant battle. But the thing at the heart of this is that anyone who had taken up a cross was going to die. You didn't see people carrying crosses for the fun of it, for exercise, for show. If you were carrying a cross you were off to be nailed to it. Someone – almost certainly not you, in this case, but someone – had made a decision to put you to death. As we look at these qualities of the Fruit of the Spirit, we have some decisions to make – important, crucial, literally life-changing decisions.

And Paul uses the same imagery as Jesus here. If you want to be able to exert self-control, to gain the upper hand over the *"sinful nature"* and live as God wants you, as someone who has been transformed and who is wanting to make a difference in this community, this culture, then hear what Paul says here:

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

And that's where we're going to leave it this week. In a couple of weeks' time (we have a visit from a couple from the Africa Inland Mission next week), we're going to think about what we might call *"The death of self"* and see what we need to do if we are going to get this stuff really working in our lives. In the meantime, think about all this. Pray about it. Ask God to show you what needs to change in your life. And ask him for the strength and the willpower to make that change.